

Whidbey Audubon Society Position Paper

KITEBOARDING AND BIRDS

ISSUE: Kiteboarding, also known as kitesurfing, has the potential to frighten birds. The sport is practiced at Deer Lagoon, Double Bluff, Crockett Lake, Swan Lake, and off West Beach.

RELATED ISSUES: Windsurfing, paddle boards, traditional surfing.

RESEARCH: Kiteboarding is a sport in which the participant is attached to both the board and a sail-like parachute. It requires about 60 feet of line and varying sail sizes. It can be practiced in either shallow or deep water, though shallows are considered dangerous because of the possibility of colliding with rocks.

Windspeeds need to be in the 10-20 miles per hour range. A 200-pound surfer needs a minimum of 15 mph. Some experts can surf in wind speeds up to 35 mph.

Kiteboarding also requires:

- Minimal vegetation to keep from fouling the long lines and expanse of sails.
- Nearby access road and parking.
- Enough space to unroll the lines and sail.
- Sufficient room to maneuver.

Using Coupeville as the model for all of Whidbey, it's found that December is the windiest month. The windiest period extends from October 19 to April 14. August is the calmest month.

Wind maps show the west side of Whidbey – particularly the central portion – to be one of the most reliable locations for high winds in all of Puget Sound.

There are studies of the effects of kiteboarding on birds (The sport is about 30 years old.), most from northern Europe. Almost all studied areas are heavily influenced by tides and do not reflect the conditions in the more or less confined spaces of the 3 most vulnerable Whidbey sites: Deer Lagoon, Crockett Lake, and Swan Lake.

The studies show varying impacts on birds. Topography, tides, length of disturbance (A British study showed the average kiteboarder spends 1.5 hours on the water.) and other factors make each situation unique.

Each study concluded there is always potential for driving away all roosting or feeding birds. Those species on or over the water are more susceptible to disturbance than those on mudflats or semi-terrestrial areas.

Researchers found reductions in birds for:

- Time for foraging.
- Space for feeding.
- Time for resting, self care (preening) and parental duties.

Birds impacted by kiteboarding tend to flush further and stay away longer than from other human-caused activities. No habituation to kiteboarding was found. Many areas had other human activities that combined with kiteboarding to worsen the impacts on birds. It wasn't always discernable which particular activity drove birds away.

The disturbances from kiteboarding have been identified as coming from two visual stimuli: Large sails, and an upright human figure on the water. High-speed maneuvers are also a factor. The loud clap of board or sail on the water is another possible source of disturbance.

Time of year is a major consideration. Migration, wintering and early-season nesting are the periods of greatest vulnerability for birds. Prolonged kiteboarding near major feeding areas during winter months have been shown to have particularly negative effects.

Deer Lagoon is the most extensive estuarine marsh on Whidbey Island. It attracts many shorebird and waterfowl species to its 890 acres and is recognized by the National Audubon Society as an Important Bird Area (IBA).

Double Bluff is situated on Useless Bay. Its shallow, exposed waters are used by a variety of diving birds and gulls.

Crockett Lake is also an IBA. At least 17 shorebird species frequent the mudflats of this open, shallow estuarine lake. Herons, raptors and waterfowl also use the 655 acres.

Swan Lake, while not designated an IBA, hosts waterfowl and some shorebirds. Several of the former breed there.

West Beach has several possible kiteboarding insertion points. A wide variety of water birds are found offshore year round. The area also attracts numerous shorebirds.

The above sites are visited by migrant, wintering and resident bird species. Fall shorebird migration is generally August through October. Spring migration is less defined, but a large portion occurs in April through mid-May.

An overlay of the major shorebird migration times with the average period of high winds shows the large movements are done outside of the optimum kiteboarding, the second half of October and the first half of April being the exceptions.

Birds wintering in the three most kiteboarding-used Whidbey locations seem particularly vulnerable. Since kiteboarding is often done by organized groups, both the time and surface area impacted are greatly enlarged.

There is one report of a Canada Goose nest abandoned by the parents at Swan Lake due to kiteboarding. Geese nest earlier than other waterfowl and are the most at risk of disturbance.

Efforts to limit kiteboarding's potential impacts have been done in the United States. Cape Cod National Seashore bans the sport from mid-March through mid-October. Point Reyes National Seashore excludes kiteboarding from March 1 through September 30.

The American Birding Association, Seattle Audubon Society, Washington Audubon, and National Audubon Society were all contacted to discover if they had policies or recommendations regarding this issue. None of these groups responded.

Practitioners of the sport counter kiteboarding criticisms with the following:

- Other human uses also scare birds, particularly power boats and people walking dogs.
- The sails don't resemble birds of prey and thus aren't intimidating to birds.

- Birds prefer onshore winds (winds blowing from the water to the land), while kiteboarders mainly use offshore wind.
- Bird food such as insects, beach invertebrates and others are not affected by kiteboarding.

RELATED ISSUE RESEARCH: Traditional surfing is mainly practiced at Fort Ebey State Park. Surfers can only catch a wave a short distance from the shore and therefore don't have much of an impact.

Windsurfing, which involves a single sail attached to a board, is rarely seen in our area.. Windsurfing would necessarily have less of an impact than kiteboarding due to the absence of long lines and large sails, and it's accomplished with less speed and fewer quick turns.

Paddleboarding consists of an individual standing on a board. A Swiss study showed birds react to the silhouette of the paddler. Paddleboarding has the potential for scaring birds off nests. The National Audubon Society has promoted it as an enhanced birding experience.

WHIDBEY AUDUBON SOCIETY'S HISTORIC INVOLVEMENT: Various WAS members have observed impacts of kiteboarding on birds. Signs educating the public about bird sensitivity have been created.

CONCLUSION/POSITIONS:

- WAS recognizes the potential for disturbance of birds by kiteboarding.
- The chapter acknowledges that data are lacking for all the Whidbey sites impacted by kiteboarding.
- The chapter shall institute studies that show Before and After Counts along with Duration of Events, Species Flushed, and Lengths of Time for Birds to Resume Normal Patterns.
- Following completion of the study, WAS will formulate a policy and take appropriate measures.

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3. Local organization: Northwest Kiteboarders, Facebook
4. Special thanks to Carlos Anderson for research assistance.